

John Strinka

Candidate for State Representative (Indiana)

What motivated you to run for office?

I felt I had to. The sponsor and prime mover of Indiana's Right to Work law was going to be unopposed, which is very common in Indiana. After spending months at the Statehouse opposing this bill very specifically, and the rest of the Republican legislative agenda (think Wisconsin in slow motion), and receiving very little respect from our elected representatives, I decided it was necessary to give the people of my district a way to disapprove of this odious law in a public election. Basically, I did this because I believed it was necessary and there really was no one else willing to do it. So I did.

What kind of budget were you working with?

Initially very small, but once it became clear I was going to spend the time to publicize it, support came. The local SP gave me and our other candidates \$500 each, which pretty much emptied our campaign treasury. Many people, some in the party and many not, came forward with individual contributions in the \$25 to \$100 range. Finally, my family members contributed generously, and heartened by all this, I spent around \$7,000 from my retirement funds for a total war chest of about \$10,000.

Did you run openly as a socialist?

Emphatically, yes! I knew I would be very unlikely to be elected. One of my primary objectives was to destigmatize "socialism" and to put it out clearly in the public square where people could openly examine our beliefs. In large part, it was a massive consciousness-raising effort.

What kind of help did you get? Who were the key supporters of your campaign?

I must thank SP member Gilbert Kuhn for giving freely of his time whenever it was needed, especially for canvassing and many time consuming activities. Brad Lorton, a good friend and local DSA head contributed both funds and his considerable expertise with political literature. National Secretary, Greg Pason, was tremendous with general advice and indispensable in setting up the website. Mimi Soltysik and Lynn Lomibao were unfailingly supportive over the net, especially in arranging "the Stewart Alexander Midwest Tour," as was Michigan SPer Adam Adriansson. Jerry



Levy gave a fantastic performance of Marx in Soho without charge for our biggest fundraiser. SP member Michael Murphy helped with canvassing, Jeremy Townsley provided invaluable demographic analysis, and many, many people encouraged me with the assurance of their votes and encouraging comments. Nick Selm and especially Steve Vladiou provided graphic design. My sister, Marlene McCrillis, my daughter Katya Strinka, and SP member Pete Behrendt were incredibly generous with their financial support. Most of all, my younger daughter, Kristina Frey served as my campaign Treasurer, and served to remind me when I was "acting like a codger," and personally helped me get going when I was feeling overwhelmed. Finally, my wife Mary was cheerfully supportive and always gracious, especially when my insecurities got the better of me, which was way too often.

What was your campaign strategy?

The beginning was determined by Indiana's ballot access requirements, which meant gathering signatures equivalent to 2% of the total vote for Secretary of State in the last election. That meant I had to acquire 636 signatures to generate the necessary 444 for my district (they are scrutinized

carefully by the county clerk, and 25% rejection is actually a very low rejection rate for petition signatures). My campaign "staff" and I easily spoke to over 2,000 people door-to-door, at the public library and other public places. Social Media, Facebook as well as the website, is simply assumed -- you cannot get the word out without some kind of electronic presence. Most schools were not receptive to requests to speak; neither were civic organizations or churches. The League of Women Voters even turned me down! Most of my speaking gigs were at union halls (not in my district), and very few advocacy organizations.

What, in your opinion, was the most effective approach for your campaign?

Hard to say. The biggest disappointment was the lack of public forums and opportunities to address politically aware audiences. Talking to people individually was a favorite, because most noticed I lacked horns and a tail, and were, thereby, encouraged to engage in political discussion. Print ads and billboards were essential in generating awareness and reached far more people than I could have otherwise. I was also proud of my issue-oriented, non-sound bite website, which provided solid info for those wanting to check out socialism.

What was your messaging and what were the responses you received?

The attention-getter was Right to Work, and the offer of an option if people were not happy about the radical right agenda forced through the Indiana General Assembly. Many people who would not have entertained socialism were upset enough about this to give me a hearing. I emphasized a 5-point program, attacking Right to Work as the headliner. I took advantage of the campaign to promote true Socialist programs, specifically direct government employment (like the old CCC or WPA on a state level), a livable minimum wage of \$16.00/hr, K through graduate education provided without cost to the individual by the state, and single payer health care that would protect women's health and reproductive rights. Most of the reaction was to the protest nature of the campaign. There wasn't a lot of direct reaction to the rest, except that a lot of it was genuinely new to people -- they'd never considered you could even think about such things in public policy.

Which messages were the most effective?

By far, the reaction to the far-right legislation by

the last General Assembly.

Please describe the political climate in your district.

76% Republican. Of five elections for State Rep in Hamilton County (comfortable north suburban Indianapolis), my race was the ONLY one where the Republican candidate had any opponent at all.

What are some of the main issues affecting your specific community? How did you address those concerns within a socialist framework?

I campaigned on state-level issues: collective bargaining, education, and jobs affect all communities in the state.

What are some issues specific to your community that were integral to garnering public support?

The education level is much higher than surrounding areas. Many of these people are fully aware the current system is deeply flawed and open-minded enough to consider a challenge to it.

Did people challenge your position? What did they say, and how did you respond?

Most were not terribly responsive to socialism per se, as these were primarily small "winners" in the capitalist system. However, many people understood that the current political system does nothing to support the common good, and responded favorably to the social-justice approach. There was less of the "godless Communist" and "Baby-killer" accusations than I expected, except they did become more pronounced as election day approached. That's never pleasant.



Please describe the kind of media outreach you did.

Press releases, billboards, print and TV interviews (not all aired), webcasts and web radio, paid display ads, plain and glossy literature, direct mail,

play ads, plain and glossy literature, direct mail, and innumerable calls and e-mail follow-ups to make any of it happen at all. This is a full job by itself.

What kind of coverage did you get with local, national or international media outlets?

Not bad, considering -- all local, but I also got articles in the major newspaper as well as alternative press and some local TV. Most of this was played as a "novelty item" by the media, but, hey, any publicity is good if you're small and maligned.

What were some of the greatest obstacles, and how did you overcome them?

Indifference. Most people can't conceive of anything different, and the suggestion that it could be better produces a lot of dissonance. People are totally wrapped up in the everyday struggle of making a living and don't really want to engage in or think about politics in any kind of meaningful way. People actually expect to buy candidates the same way they buy breakfast cereal, and it is enormously difficult to get them to engage. There is a disturbing undercurrent, roughly 25% of the people who simply do not respond to any facts that conflict with their worldview. Don't know about "overcoming" them, just keep on truckin'. I will say when the people who most vehemently attack you are ignorant, it's a pretty good sign you're on the right side of things.

Anything surprising happen during your campaign?

Lots and lots of people told me that they thought they were the only ones in the neighborhood who had left leanings. Many were pleasantly surprised that a candidate would openly embrace a left position at all, let alone socialism. After it was all over, it was these folks, and being able to give them heart, that made the thing worthwhile.

What are some things you would have liked to do, if you had more time and resources?

Win.

How do you think the results of your campaign reflected the political consciousness of people in your community specifically and the American public in general.

One small step forward. 10% was not enough to get a lot of attention, but those who were engaged were amazed an open Socialist could get 2,862 votes for State Rep in the heartland of conservative

America.

Do you plan to run for office again? If so, for what position? If not, why?

Probably not. Being a candidate for public office took me way outside my comfort zone, and I found it psychologically and financially difficult. However, I did this out of a certain feeling that it was something necessary to do, and there was no one else to do it. A similar sense of obligation could persuade me again, but I don't think anytime soon.



Any final thoughts, observations, anecdotes?

I want to thank all the people who helped along the way -- this was a true Socialist campaign in the sense that the people must do it themselves if they want to make things better. Heartfelt thanks to all 2,862 citizens of Hamilton County who had the courage and integrity to actually cast their vote for socialism in a public election.

And finally, I could write a book -- with a little help from my friends, perhaps I will.